

The Life and Times of the Woman in Red, Part II

by The Woman in Red

Category: Matrix

Genre: Adventure

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2000-04-20 09:00:00

Updated: 2000-04-20 09:00:00

Packaged: 2016-04-27 16:00:22

Rating: M

Chapters: 1

Words: 6,439

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Phoenix meets with Brown, receives bad news from the Oracle and takes her boat out for some Agent-free time-or so she thinks.

The Life and Times of the Woman in Red, Part II

AGENTS AND HANGOVERS JUST DON'T MIX

I returned to the Control Room a little after 1:00 am. I was hammered, totally trashed. Anne was dozing in her chair listening to lite rock. What the hell is lite rock? If it's lite, it doesn't rock. I changed the station to BCN, cranked it up and ripped the knob off. Like I said, I was drunk.

She woke up, rubbed her eyes and gave me the finger. "Looks like you had a good time tonight."

"Oh yeah, the whole gang was there," I drawled. "How's our patient doing?"

"You should have been here, he stood up and recited the Gettysburg address just a few minutes ago."

"Bite me." She sauntered out and I threw myself into the chair and kicked off my shoes. I glanced at the unconscious Agent on the monitor and promptly passed out.

I didn't wake up until Lisa arrived to relieve me, "Good morning, sunshine!"

I sat up rather suddenly, which was entirely the wrong thing to do. I thought for a minute that my head was going to fall off and roll across the floor. I moaned and leaned back carefully in my chair.

Lisa peered into my bloodshot eyes, "Looks like you had a good time

last night."

"I'm not sure. I don't remember. Some asshole suggested Kamikaze shots and the rest of the evening is just a blur. I don't even remember getting here." I stood up carefully. That wasn't so bad. Walking was another story. I could feel my eyeballs bouncing around in their sockets with each step. I took the coward's way out and shuffled across the room in the direction of the shower.

Lisa cackled evilly behind me and I gave her the finger.

I came out feeling almost human, or at least less like death warmed over. I hadn't felt up to getting dressed so I was wearing scrubs and socks, just like our unwelcome guest.

"So, how was the meeting with Jones, last night?" she asked.

I shrugged, "Not terribly productive. I showed him the Jedi mind-trick and he's going to talk to their development team. And, he got his face slapped by a cross-dresser. I forgot about Maxine. She was sitting at the bar in a red dress when he came in."

Lisa snickered, "He was lucky. She's got a heck of a right cross. I've seen her take out a guy twice her size with one punch."

"I think she liked him. She only slaps the ones she likes. They are supposed to fall at her feet and beg her forgiveness. I just didn't see that happening, so I intervened. Mitzi and the girls were there. I caught their first set."

"Oh, how are they doing?" she inquired.

"Mitzi's still as wild as ever. You should have seen what she was wearing. A minidress made entirely of thong sandals."

"Thong sandals? What was she thinking?"

"I dunno. She had a bag and earrings to match. Not my style, but it works for her. People love it. Felicia and Bernadette were bickering madly as usual. I don't know how Mitzi manages to keep those two from killing each other."

"Oh, shit, I almost forgot. The Boss called. He wanted me to remind you that you should turn the patient every so often to prevent bedsores." She smirked at me, smug with the knowledge that there was no way she was ever going to have to touch Brown.

"Ick. Probably be a good idea. He's already going to be mega-pissed when we get him back up and running. Bedsores will only make it worse." I turned and looked at him on the monitors feeling my gorge rising. I warned my stomach to behave itself, then opened the door into the Box. I marched over to him, yanked back the covers and grabbed his shoulders.

I heaved him up to a sitting position and rolled him over onto his side and he just kept going. Not being at my steadiest, he overbalanced me and I fell on my back. He landed face down on top of me.

"Oh, gross. Lisa! Help! Get it off of me."

She stuck her head in the door. "Screw you! I'm not touching that thing."

I panicked and shoved at him and managed to pry myself out from under him. I lost control of my stomach and bolted for the bathroom where I called Ralph on the Big White Phone for some time. Agents and hangovers just don't mix.

I tottered out some time later. I felt much better. I wanted sushi and a cold beer. Best damned hangover cure in any reality.

"The Operator called while you were worshipping in the Temple of the White Porcelain God. Jones left you a message, wants you to call him back."

I gave her a rather dirty look and picked up the radio, stuck in the earpiece and turned it on. "OK, Jones, what have you got for me."

"We'll need to meet."

Damn. "Fine, meet me at Marina Bay in two hours. I'll be the woman in red eating sushi."

"Affirmative." I turned off the radio and flung it on the table. "Great, just what I need, another damn Agent on top of a hangover."

"Aren't you going to finish moving Brown," she asked.

I looked into the Box, he was lying face down on the floor. "Screw it. He's been moved to a different position, and he's not exactly going to complain about his comfort." I shut the door into the Box firmly.

I instructed Lisa to arrange for Neo to meet me and went upstairs to find something to wear besides scrubs.

Two hours later, Neo and I sat a table in the warm sunshine, watching the tourists pass by. I hadn't dressed up for the meeting, I looked just like they did: T-shirt, shorts and sneakers. My boat rode at anchor at the end of the dock, and I looked at her yearningly. Not a good idea in my current shape, though. Tomorrow, I promised myself. I'd take her out to my own private place and enjoy a couple of Agent-free hours.

Beer in one hand, chopsticks in the other, I was systematically demolishing a plate of assorted sushi while he watched squeamishly. "I don't know how you can eat that stuff. It's disgusting to watch you. It's like eating a plate full of chum."

"The only thing that works after a night of drinking like that. Remember, you've been home since then. I'm still inside, so I feel like crap. This will make me feel right as rain, as the Oracle says."

"It's making me sick." He was eating calamari, not the rings, either, the little squidlings.

"Yeah, well what you are eating looks like deep-fried spiders to me, so shut up and eat."

We worked on our meals in companionable silence and I was feeling considerably improved when a shadow fell over the table.

I hadn't quite finished, but I pushed my plate away and got up. The presence of an Agent was not exactly conducive to a hearty appetite. "It's too crowded here, lets find a place on the boardwalk for our discussion." I didn't offer my hand, but then I'd just eaten.

Jones and I walked away, Neo remaining a watchful distance behind us.

"Still hiding behind your bodyguard, I see," sneered Jones.

"I'm a scientist, Agent Jones, not a warrior. If you were to decide to get aggressive, I'd have no chance against you. Same as you'd have no chance against him."

"So you don't trust me."

"You've got that right, Mac. I trust you about as far as I could throw you. And considering that I can't stand to touch you, that's not very far."

"You shook my hand twice last night," he appeared puzzled by the contradiction. Agents just cannot understand our irrational human behavior.

"I hadn't just eaten. Still, it was touch and go. My good manners overrode my squeamishness." I shuddered in memory and the sushi rolled over in my stomach.

"I don't understand. I've never known any human reaction to us except fear. You don't seem afraid, just mistrustful and sickened." He stopped and looked directly at me, obviously expecting more input.

I took a step back from him. "I'm not sure exactly why, it's kind of like vertigo. Do you know what that is?" At his negative response, I offered further explanation. "Vertigo is what happens when the Matrix sends conflicting messages to our brains. Our stomachs get caught in the middle and we puke."

I sighed, this was not easy. Human concepts don't translate well into machine language. I tried again. "The Matrix is telling me that I'm standing upright. Yet, if you turned the world upside down around me, my "body" would still feel the pull of gravity from below and my brain would believe that it was upright. My "eyes" would see the world as being right side up and tell my brain that I was upside down. My brain wouldn't know whether or not I was upside down or right-side up, so I'd throw up on my shoes."

"OK, so how does this relate to me?" I'd lost him.

"The Matrix is telling my brain you are a human. You look like a man and if I touch you, you feel like a man. My brain disagrees, it knows the truth. It knows you are a monster. A monster in human form; inhuman, unfeeling, dishonorable, and unethical. My stomach doesn't

know who to believe, but it doesn't like monsters."

"I'm not a monster. But I'm not a man either," he disagreed.

"Jones, I know more than I ever wanted to know about what your bodies are shaped like. They made you very much a man if Brown is any indication." Don't blush, and don't look there. Shit, I looked. And I blushed. But I had to ask. I am a scientist after all, "Why did they do that? They didn't bother with body hair other than above the neck. Is there a purpose for equipping you in that fashion?"

"We were designed for certain functionality, including interrogation. Our developers' research indicated that rape was effective in such a situation. We've since developed a serum that is more efficient for our purposes."

"You mean you are fully functional, just like Mr. Data? That's monstrous!" I blurted, and then clapped my hand over my mouth, eyes wide in horror at what I'd just said. Why did my mouth have to get away from me like that?

"I am fully functional, but I am not a monster."

"So, have you seen the new Gwar video, yet?" I changed the subject desperately. My report was going to generate a great deal of dirty jokes back at the Centre.

"Gwar video?" I'd lost him again.

"How about those Red Sox?" I tried again.

He just moved forward and looked at me impassively. I stepped back again. Time for another lesson in humanity.

"Dude, will you stop crowding me." He moved forwards and I moved backwards." Its called personal space. My personal space. It varies from person to person. Mine happens to be about 5 feet in diameter around me. Please stay out of it."

He looked at the air around me, seeing nothing.

"I'm not going to try and explain this one, just don't get any closer to me, I keep having to back up, and if we keep this up, I'll end up in the Bay."

"Is this because I am a "monster" or does this apply to others as well," He inquired.

"Everyone that knows me knows that I have two rules. Don't invade my space and never touch me. I can't stand it when people get too close to me or touch me. Close friends don't have to worry about the first rule, but the second applies to everyone."

"I see, so if I really wanted to upset you," he smiled coldly and moved towards me and I backed up until I was up against the railing. I saw Neo tense and I squeezed my eyes shut and turned my face away. "Look at me."

Easy Neo, I'm not sure, but I don't think he's going to hurt me.

"No. If I look at you, I'll be sick for the second time today and sushi doesn't taste as good coming up as it did going down."

He grabbed my chin and turned my head to face him. That did it. I didn't have to open my eyes. I pushed him away and turned to heave over the railing. I was right. Sushi really doesn't taste good revisited.

Neo pushed Jones out of the way and helped me sit down after I had finished donating my lunch to the seagulls. He gave me a tissue and I wiped my mouth and blew my nose.

I stood up and faced down Jones. "Next time I won't be so polite, you'll be wearing it. Let's get this over with. You asked for this meeting. What?" I demanded curtly.

"I've spoken with the developers. I'll need to see Brown and run some diagnostics. They've given me a device to use."

"There's no other way?"

"No, it requires one of us to operate the device. It would be inert in your hands. And the information provided would be meaningless to you. I can interpret it."

"Whatever. Excuse me." I stepped away and whipped out my phone. I had a brief conversation with the Boss, who gave his approval for the visit.

I considered calling the Center to warn Lisa, but decided a little surprise would build character. Actually, it was almost time for Anne to start her shift, I smiled evilly to myself.

I turned back to Jones, "OK, it's been approved. Let's go. My boss trusts you more than I do. But, that's not saying a whole lot." *Come one Neo, we are taking Jones to see Brown.*

I led them down a few back alleys and picked a door at random. I opened it onto the Control Room at the Centre. Lisa and Anne were both engrossed in the PlayStation. They looked up when the door opened.

NEXT INSTALLMENT: Bad news from the Oracle

BAD NEWS FROM THE ORACLE

Neo and Agent Jones followed me into the Control Room. Stars in their eyes, they greeted Neo. *He's so cute,* they chorused. Then they caught sight of our visitor.

Anne screamed, "It's an Agent!" and ran. I heard her feet pounding down the hall. Lisa, the brave one, stood her ground for a whole minute before following her, shrieking in terror as she ran. I was proud of them, though. Neither of them looked back.

"You sure know how to clear a room, Jones." I closed the door behind him and opened a door into the Box. Brown still lay where I had left him, sprawled face down on the floor.

Jones followed me in, Neo right behind. I closed the door, sealing us

in. Jones stood over Brown for a moment and then looked at me, "Why is he lying on the floor like that?"

"He fell on me when I was turning him this morning, and after I finished puking up my shoes, I didn't have the stomach to touch him again. Please, feel free." I gestured in the direction of the bed.

He lifted him easily and laid the limp Agent back on the mattress. I pulled the blankets up over him and sat down to watch Jones. He pulled a device about the size and shape of a Palm Pilot out of his pocket and flipped up the cover. It was Palm Pilot. He inserted a cable into it and sat down next to Brown. This I had to see.

Fascinated, I forgot about my stomach and moved closer to see better as he inserted the plug on the other end of the cable into Brown's ear. The tiny screen filled up with data encoded similarly to the Matrix code. He grunted and tapped the screen in various places with the stylus.

My phone rang. It was my Operator, he was patching through a call from the Oracle. My heart sank, I had a bad feeling about this. I excused myself and opened the door. Neo followed me out and I closed the door behind him. Lisa and Anne had returned, but were skittish and ready to bolt at the first sign of Jones. We watched him on the monitor as he continued to manipulate the stylus against the screen.

My phone rang again, "Phoenix here."

"Hello, dear." What she then told me was for me alone, as she reminded me of my doom, foretold many years before.

"Are you sure the time has come?" I asked, not willing to believe.

"Yes. I hate giving good people bad news, and you are one of my best."

"Do you know which one of them it will be?" Sometimes, if you ask the right question, she'll get a little less cryptic.

"It could be either one, but it will be one of them. And it will be soon. I can't say how soon. But tread warily around them child, it is inevitable."

I stood staring at the monitor, tears running down my face as I said good-bye to the woman who had raised me. Lisa and Anne came and stood on either side of me. "What's the matter?" inquired Anne.

"Bad news from the Oracle," was all I had to say.

No one asked me any more questions as I stood there with my jaw set and willed the tears away. They already knew the answers.

"We could just seal them in the Box forever, " suggested Lisa. "You said they can't get out of there."

"At least one of them has to get out. The Oracle tells us what we

need to know and she's never wrong. We may not always interpret her words correctly, but what she's told me leaves little room for doubt." I swallowed hard and put my thoughts about my fate aside as I reentered the Box with Neo close by my side.

Jones removed the cable and flipped the cover closed before slipping the gadget back in his pocket. I eyed the pocket, thoughts of larceny dancing in my head, but decided not to risk it.

"What's the diagnosis?"

"I believe the human expression is: I have good news and bad news."

"Somehow I have a feeling that my idea of good news and your idea of good news are worlds apart."

"The good news is that you didn't do any damage to his kernel, what you would call his mind. He is still running in the background. Unfortunately, the user interface, what you would call his body, is no longer communicating with the kernel. He receives no input and is not capable of generating any output."

"In other words, he's completely paralyzed. And I'll bet he's pissed as hell." She looked up at Jones. "So, how do we fix him?"

Jones shrugged, "I'll leave that to the developers. I'll give them the results of the diagnostics. I should have more information by tomorrow morning."

I pulled out my own Palm Pilot and looked at the schedule for the next day. "I won't be inside tomorrow until late afternoon. I'll meet you at the Marina tomorrow at 7:00. Meet me on the dock by my slip, lucky #13."

Neo showed him back out to the Marina, while I went upstairs to my whiteboard. It takes up an entire wall of her office, and if I need extra room, I just write on the windows. I had to think this whole thing through. I had a feeling that I had been told something significant about Agents.

I was still scribbling, swearing and erasing when Lisa and Anne came in. "Hey, Boss, what are you doing?" inquired Anne.

I turned triumphantly, and announced, "Agents ARE just like PC's. The actual Agent program runs in the background like DOS does with Windows. In order for the Agent program to operate in the Matrix, they have a GUI (Graphical User Interface) that runs on top, just like Windows95. You know how Windows crashes or locks up. You get a GPF or the Blue Screen of Death. CTRL/ALT/DELETE works sometimes, and you can try getting Windows to run afterwards, but you usually have to restart to return Windows to normal function. And if Windows isn't functioning, there's no way to get at DOS."

"So what does all of this have to do with getting rid of them?" Lisa wanted to know.

"Nothing as far as I can figure, I now understand more about them, which should help if it turns out that I have to restart Brown's GUI. It also means what I've wondered about all along is right. Microsoft

developed the Agent program. Jones is probably in Redmond right now meeting with Bill Gates."

"Oh, and Lisa. The thing about the bedsores was not funny. Just for that he's all yours until tomorrow night. Take good care of him." I picked up the ringing phone on my desk and vanished.

"Anne," wailed Lisa, "that was your idea. Now we've got to spend the whole damn night and day watching over that creature. I hate you."

Anne pulled a CD case out of her pocket, "Not to worry, I picked up Wipeout3 this morning. Let's go fire up the PlayStation for an all-night gaming session. I got the cheat book, too."

It was late the next afternoon when I returned to the Matrix. It took all of my courage. I wanted to chicken out, quit my job and try and avoid my fate somehow. I went to the Marina to take out my boat instead.

This year's vessel was a 48' cabin cruiser named "Living Dead Girl". Sleek and shiny, plenty of room for parties, she also had a tremendous amount of power. Another former Potential was a real magic-worker with engines. He had souped her up considerably beyond her manufacturer's specs.

Trinity called while I was prepping her. "Hey, Trin. 'sup?" I cast off from the dock and went up to the pilothouse.

"Oh, this and that. Just called to see how you are doing." She sounded casual, but I wasn't falling for it."

"So, Neo told you about my phone call from the Oracle yesterday."

"Yeah, and I got worried."

"Don't worry, Trin. If I don't make it, I have no regrets. I've done the best that I could with the resources available."

"So there's hope? You did say, "if". "

"Yes, there's hope. A choice is going to be forced upon me. When that choice comes, my decision will determine whether I live or die. Unfortunately, I don't know what the choice will be, or how I'll know which way to choose, or whether I'll want to live or die."

"That's pretty typical of the Oracle."

"Yes, and it's difficult for me. I'm a scientist and a bureaucrat. Decision-making requires that I appoint a blue-ribbon committee and a team of researchers. After six months of meetings and data collection, the committee gives me their decision based on the data collected by the researchers. I'd expect at least a 500-page report. I can't just make a decision, especially one that my life depends upon, by the seat of my pants. She's told me to use my instincts. Scientists don't have instincts, we have methodologies and processes."

"I gotta go Trin, time for me to head out to open water. I'll talk at

you later."

I started the engines and eased her out of the slip and into the harbor. I tooted my horn and waved at the Harbormaster in passing. He was one of us, retired from active duty, and he was the one who taught me to love boats almost as much as he did.

NEXT INSTALLMENT: A Three-hour tour

A THREE HOUR TOUR

Once out of the harbor, I switched on the radar and the GPS and gently increased the Girl's speed. The powerful engines thrummed beneath my feet as I guided her out to open water. Once the radar showed I was clear of traffic, I opened her up wide, feeling the great boat lifting high out of the water until she was barely skimming the surface.

At times like this, the Matrix was Disneyland. Enormous power at my command, I made her fly over the waves, heading for my own private place just off the Cape. It was a beautiful day, clear blue skies, low humidity, bright sun sparkling down on the water.

I smiled with real pleasure and turned on the stereo system. Built specifically for parties, the Living Dead Girl was wired for sound, there were control panels conveniently located all over her. "She's got a machinehead," I sang along with the music, headbanging as I drove. It was so good to get away from all the pressures of the Centre and those damned Agents, where I could listen to loud music, drink beer and lie in the sun for a while. My tan was starting to fade.

I soon reached my usual place, and I shut down the engines and dropped anchor. I fished out a fresh beer from the fridge and opened it, draining about half of it in one long swallow. I climbed up to the deck in front of the pilothouse and spread out my towel. I stripped off my shorts and bathing suit and slathered myself liberally with suntan oil before lying on my back, reclined against the pilothouse wall. I stared out at the calm water and finished my beer before settling back and closing my eyes. All was right with the world.

Two minutes later my cell phone rang shrilly. *Lisa, Anne? That better not be one of you bothering me.*

Anne replied, *Oh, no, Phoenix, we know better than to call you when you are out on the boat.*

I fished out my phone from my shorts pocket. I gave it a dirty look and informed it in a rather sarcastic tone, "I'm sorry, I'm not available take your call right now." I stood up and heaved the phone out over the water, skipping it several times over the waves. "Please leave a message after the beep and GO TO HELL!" I shouted at it as it sank out of sight.

I sighed and sprawled on my towel again, closing my eyes. I stretched my arms above my head, interlocking my fingers. There is no cell phone. I think I drifted off to sleep for a few minutes before being rudely awakened by a rather firm grip on my wrists.

My eyes snapped open and I screamed with fear and rage. "Jones!" He was kneeling over me and smirking at me. He had one hand around both my wrists and he was fiddling with one of the control panels that operated the sound system. Classical music blared briefly from the speakers before being silenced. I stared at him in icily, my jaw set.

He slowly examined the length of my body. I reminded myself that my real body was in the real world, fully dressed and reclining in a chair. This was just my user interface. "Hmmm, perhaps you want me to demonstrate our obsolete interrogation technique for you."

Thank God for suntan oil. I slithered out of his grip and smacked him hard across the face. His sunglasses went the same way as my cell phone. He didn't look happy. Maybe hitting him wasn't such a good idea after all. I leapt to my feet and bolted. Jones followed, grabbing at me, but was unable to get a grip on my slippery skin. I ran down the stairs to the lower deck and dove off the side, swimming under the length of the boat.

I climbed the ladder at the stern, making almost no sound. I could just see the top of his head, he was leaning over the rail looking down into the water. Typical. They just don't understand how unpredictable we humans are. I slipped into the pilothouse, keeping low, and unclipped the harpoon gun hung on the wall. Dodge this, sucker. I climbed to the roof of the pilothouse, grateful that the sun was not in a position to betray me by casting a shadow in his vision.

He was still watching for me to come up when I leapt off the pilothouse with a shriek and hit him in the back with both feet, and then reversed direction. I flipped over backward and landed on my feet. I pushed my tangled hair out of my eyes and I watched him hit the water.

I cocked and aimed the harpoon gun at him. He was thrashing around madly. "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't harpoon your sorry ass, Jones," I called out.

He went under and clawed his way back to the surface. "It's not necessary." A wave washed over his head and he spat out seawater. "I can't swim. It's not in my functionality specifications."

I shrugged and went back up to the pilothouse and clipped the harpoon gun back on the wall. I opened another beer and sauntered back on to the deck. I leaned on the rail as I watched him struggle. Finally he went down and didn't come back up again.

I swore and chucked the beer over the side and then dove in. I swam down and grabbed Jones and hauled him up to the surface. I towed him to the back of the boat and shoved him up on to the stern. I climbed the ladder and jumped up and down on his stomach until he coughed up a considerable volume of salt water.

I flipped up one of the bench seats and got out a couple of beach towels. I sat him up and wrapped one around him, briskly rubbing his hair and face dry while he coughed and gagged.

I left him there while I went up to the foredeck and put my suit and shorts on again. When I returned he was standing on the deck looking

like a drowned rat. Not again. At least this time my wet Agent was capable of handling the icky part himself.

"Jones, I'll go get you some dry clothes. I've got quite a lost and found collection below. I'll get you the gun cleaning kit, too." I went and rummaged through a couple of closets until I found a T-shirt and shorts that would fit. I always kept a gun cleaning kit since the day that I'd fallen overboard wearing a sidearm and wrecked it. Immersion in salt water is not good for dry land weapons.

When I climbed back up the stairs I was very thankful that his back was turned. He was stark naked and didn't have the decency to cover himself with a towel. If only he been human, I would have thought him magnificent. Unlike Brown, whose build was slim and athletic, Jones was big. Jones' shoulders were broad and rippled with muscles. His biceps were heroic. His back was sleekly muscled, tapering to a narrow waist and a pair of glutes to die for. If only.

He started to turn around and I jumped backwards down the stairs and ran to another closet and started rifling through it. That T-shirt would never fit. I finally found a tank top and nerved myself up to face him. I prayed that he had covered himself with a towel.

My prayers were not answered. He was still naked and was now turned towards me, arms akimbo. Modesty was apparently not part of his specs, either. I looked him over the same way he had looked me over. Why can't I find a human with six-pack abs like that? He was as impressively masculine as Brown. I was reminded of his earlier taunting. Ugh. I shoved the dry clothes and the cleaning kit at him and snatched up his dripping suit, then turned on my heel and marched below.

I sorted his clothes, pocketing his cufflinks and tie bar, then threw the whites in the washer. The radio and cell-phone were a total write-off, so I chucked them in the trash. I'm sure there are more where they came from. When I returned to the stern, he was lounging on one of the benches but was decently covered.

He held out the gun cleaning kit to me, "What am I supposed to do with this? I've never had to clean my guns before."

I sighed and accepted the kit. I sat crosslegged on the deck and spread a towel across my lap. I held out both hands to him palm up. He looked at me impassively for a long moment before unholstering his pistols and placing one on each palm.

I quickly and efficiently cleaned and oiled the weapons. I'd been trained to do it blindfolded, and been timed. I replaced all the materials in the tin and put it aside before reloading the weapons and passing them back to him, butt first. He examined first one, then the other. The second one he cocked and aimed at me. I gave him a dirty look and stuck out my tongue at him as I got up and went below to put away the kit and throw the towel in the hamper.

I caught sight of myself in the mirror, my hair was well on its way to drying into a matted tangle. Better get it wet again and comb it before it dries this time. I dug out a comb, shucked off my shorts and climbed up to the deck. I jumped up on the bench and dove off the stern. I swam away from the boat and stayed in the water awhile before returning to my unwelcome guest.

I sat on a bench and combed the tangles out of my hair. Jones was mercifully quiet. I wasn't in the mood for any further verbal sparring with him. I just wanted some peace and quiet and relaxation, and no bloody Agents.

I knew what else I wanted. I went below, put away the comb and dug out a battered tin box from its hiding place. I took it up to the foredeck and sat rolling a joint. I remembered that I had thrown away my second beer so I went to the pilothouse for another, whistling the theme to Gilligan's Island. A three hour tour, indeed. I looked at the clock and contacted Lisa.

Lees?

Yes, boss.

Can you contact Neo and let him know that I don't need him to babysit me during my meeting with Jones.

Getting brave, Phoenix?

Oh, my aren't we cocky. As I recall, you stood your ground for a whole minute before running screaming down the hall. And Neo was there.

Properly humbled, boss. What's up? The meeting get called off.

Not exactly. I'll fill you in when I get back. I've got a stowaway on board.

JONES?!?

Don't yell, Lees. Gives me a headache. Remind me to always check the boat for Agents before leaving the dock in the future.

Are you going to be OK? she sounded about to cry.

I'll be fine. Agents can't swim

What?

Later, Lees.

If there is a later. And if there isn't can I have the boat?

Vulture. Just for that I'll be back soon.

Good luck.

Thanks.

For good measure, I drank another beer and rolled a joint. I returned to the stern and sat on the deck leaning back against the bench while I smoked and drank. Jones just watched me, he didn't say a word. I could almost tolerate him as long as he kept his distance and his damn mouth shut.

I emptied my beer, flipped the roach over the side and got up. It was too quiet and I came out here to blow off some steam not sit here feeling for myself. Let him sit there like a lump, I wanted to rock. I went to the main control panel, chose my favorite CD and played the song that my boat was named after. Loud. And then I played it again. I climbed up atop the pilothouse and screamed along with the lyrics, headbanging and dancing. This was better.

I did a backflip off the roof onto the deck and kept headbanging. I was not going to let Jones' presence keep me from my enjoyments. This is my boat, and he was not invited.

I turned off the CD and turned on the radio. I was changing the station back from classical when I heard the sound of an engine approaching fast. What the hell? No one ever comes here, it's off the beaten path and there's no decent fishing. It couldn't be, could it?

A beautifully-restored wooden hulled Chris-craft cabin cruiser pulled up astern of us. A familiar face waved at me from behind her wheel. He sped her around us in a circle, kicking up a considerable amount of spray. More familiar faces grinned at me from various lounging places on her decks. I stood there gaping as he pulled her up alongside us and cut her engine. "Highlander! Jesus, what the hell did you do to the Falcon?"

NEXT INSTALLMENT: There can be only one

End
file.